

# Ranked Choice Voting

## A Major Threat to Free, Fair, and Secure Elections

By Jack McPherrin

### Key Takeaways

- Ranked choice voting disenfranchises voters by forcing them to rank candidates, and discarding those voters' ballots if they fail to use the ranking system or if their ballots contain mistakes, which are common. One comprehensive study shows more than one-in-10 ballots are discarded in this fashion.
- Disenfranchisement disproportionately affects minority communities.
- RCV causes substantial voter confusion, lower voter turnout, and a decrease in public confidence in the election system.
- RCV results in significant administrative errors by election officials, which can lead to delays in processing election results, and can cause a losing candidate to be mistakenly certified as the winner.
- RCV can cause candidates who do not receive the most votes to win the election, subverting the will of the people.
- RCV manipulates third-party voters into supporting mainstream candidates and further entrenches the power of the two dominant political parties.
- RCV poses an immense threat to election integrity and fair democratic processes.
- Policymakers should ban ranked choice voting in every jurisdiction.

Ranked choice voting (RCV) has become a heavily discussed topic in recent years. Promoted primarily by progressive, left-wing organizations, RCV is touted as a way of fixing problems related to the two-party system in the United States by giving voters a greater voice and improving overall satisfaction with the electoral system. For instance, Fair Vote—one of the leading advocates for RCV—states on its website, “Our ‘choose-one’ elections deprive voters of meaningful choices, create increasingly toxic campaign cycles, advance candidates who lack broad support and leave voters feeling like our voices are not heard. Ranked choice voting is the solution.”<sup>1</sup>

There are certainly problems associated with the two-party system, including elite dominance over the internal processes of the Republican and Democratic parties and an exponential rise in political polarization in recent decades. Further, it is likely true that many Americans feel like they are forced to choose between the “lesser of two evils” when casting their vote, rather than being able to vote for a candidate who reflects their values and inspires genuine excitement.

However, ranked choice voting is not a solution to any of these problems. In fact, it exacerbates them, while also adding entirely new problems to the electoral equation. Ultimately, RCV undermines our electoral system and should concern all those who value election integrity and fairness in the voting process.

## How Ranked Choice Voting Works

As its name implies, RCV requires voters to rank candidates by preference in descending order rather than simply casting one ballot for their chosen candidate. For example, in a race with five candidates, voters rank them from one (first choice) to five (last choice). If no candidate wins a majority of votes in the first round of voting, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. The ballots that ranked the eliminated candidate at the top are then automatically transferred to the candidate who was ranked second by those voters. If this initial ballot redistribution still does not result in one candidate gaining a majority of votes, the process repeats, with another candidate being eliminated and those ballots being redistributed.

This process only ends when one candidate ends up with a majority of votes, which often results in several rounds of candidate elimination and ballot redistribution, depending on varying jurisdictional rules that dictate how many candidates are allowed on the ballot in the first place. Thus, a candidate who a majority or plurality of voters did not initially rank as their first choice could end up winning the election.



## The Many Problems Resulting from Ranked Choice Voting

Though ranked choice voting is often promoted as a method of fostering multi-party competition, offering voters more choices, and improving the democratic system, it fails on all of those counts and creates several additional problems that threaten the stability, integrity, and fundamental fairness of our electoral system.

### 1 *'Ballot Exhaustion' and Voter Disenfranchisement*

One of the most concerning problems with RCV occurs when voters choose to vote for only one candidate or fail to exhaustively rank all of the candidates on their ballots. If a voter's top choice is eliminated in the first round of voting, and that voter has not listed preferences for the remaining candidates, that voter's ballot is thrown away and not used in the final vote—a process referred to as “ballot exhaustion.”<sup>2</sup> This results in a significant number of votes being discarded in RCV elections, which effectively disenfranchises numerous voters. For instance, one in-depth study of 96 different RCV elections by the Maine Heritage Policy Center and Alaska Policy Forum found that an average of 10.92 percent of ballots were exhausted by the final round of voting,<sup>3</sup> meaning that more than one-in-10 voters were disenfranchised. Another study of four local RCV elections in Washington and California by political scientists Craig Burnett and Vladimir Kogan found rates of ballot exhaustion from 9.6 percent to 27.1 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, this disenfranchisement particularly affects minority voters. A study of an RCV election in San Francisco by the Public Research Institute found that “the prevalence of ranking three candidates was lowest among African Americans, Latinos, voters with less education, and those whose first language was not English.”<sup>5</sup> An analysis of an RCV election in New York City by Politico found that “whiter, wealthier neighborhoods were more likely to employ the new ranking system than lower income areas of the city, many of which are home to Black, Latino, and Asian communities. And voters in the south Bronx had a higher incidence of ballot mistakes, which invalidated some of their picks.”<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Voter Confusion, Decreased Turnout, and Lack of Public Confidence in the Election System

The problems of ballot exhaustion and voter disenfranchisement largely stem from the inherently confusing RCV system, which has resulted in decreased turnout and a lack of public confidence in elections. For instance, a survey conducted by *The Boston Globe* of eligible voters in Maine who did not participate in the 2018 congressional midterm election in Maine—the first federal election in the country that used ranked choice voting—revealed that 26 percent stayed home because of confusion over the ranking system.<sup>7</sup>

In a study of RCV elections in San Francisco, political scientist Jason McDaniel found that RCV adoption is significantly correlated with decreases in voter turnout across a variety of demographics, stating that “the adoption of RCV exacerbated disparities in voter turnout between those who are already likely to vote and those who are not, including younger voters and those with lower levels of education.”<sup>8</sup> McDaniel estimates voter turnout decreases by approximately 8 percent when comparing RCV elections to non-RCV elections.<sup>9</sup>

Proponents consistently claim that RCV is a better option because it increases voter turnout and leads to greater public satisfaction and confidence in the system. Yet, not only does RCV decrease rather than increase turnout, it also has no positive impact on voters’ attitudes towards the system. A survey by political scientist Lindsay Nielson found that RCV has “no positive impact on voters’ confidence in elections and the democratic process... overall, most voters do not prefer to vote in RCV elections and do not think that they result in fair election outcomes.”<sup>10</sup>

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## 3 Administrative Errors and Delayed Results

Beyond voters’ RCV-induced confusion, disenfranchisement, and lack of confidence lies another significant problem. Confusion amongst election officials often causes delayed processing of results and can even lead to a losing candidate being mistakenly declared the winner.

By nature, RCV places an additional burden on election officials and poll workers, increasing the likelihood of errors and delaying dissemination of the results. For example, in New York City’s 2021 Democratic mayoral primary—which was the jurisdiction’s first RCV election—135,000 test ballots were mistakenly counted in the results. Worse, this was not revealed until after the 11th round of tabulation.<sup>11</sup> Another example occurred during 2022 elections in Alameda County, California, in which RCV led to a candidate for the school board being mistakenly certified as the winner. The error went unnoticed by election officials for two months, and was only rectified after an external advocacy group eventually caught the mistake.<sup>12</sup>

A report from the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA) highlights the associated problem of lengthy delays in providing election results. During the 2009 Minneapolis mayoral race that used RCV, election officials estimated that it would take 37 eight-hour shifts with 102 election officials to tabulate the results for just 70,000 voters. The total vote tabulation was estimated to require more than 13 days of round-the-clock man-hours. In the aforementioned New York City mayoral primary, it took 15 days to reach an outcome.<sup>13</sup> A separate FGA survey conducted in 2022 found that 66 percent of voters were less likely to support RCV after learning that declaring a winner can take days or weeks after the election occurs.<sup>14</sup>

## **4** *Electoral Manipulation and Subversion of Democracy*

The complexity of RCV also facilitates electoral manipulation by actors who understand the intricacies of the system to a much greater degree than the average voter. Such exploitation subverts the democratic process and essentially tricks third-party voters into supporting the mainstream candidates and political parties they are diametrically opposed to.

For example, in the previously cited 2018 Maine congressional race, incumbent Republican Rep. Bruce Poliquin was challenged by Democrat Jared Golden and independents Tiffany Bond and William Hoar. Poliquin received 134,184 votes (46.33 percent of total votes cast), Golden received 132,013 votes (45.58 percent), Bond received 16,552 votes (5.71 percent), and Hoar received 6,875 votes (2.37 percent). However, once the second round of tabulation was completed per RCV procedures, 8,253 ballots were exhausted, and the ballots for Bond and Hoar were redistributed—with 4,747 votes allocated to Poliquin and 10,427 votes allocated to Golden. As a result, though Poliquin received the most votes on Election Day, Golden was declared the winner by a tally of 142,440 to 138,931.<sup>15</sup>

A similar outcome occurred in Alaska's 2022 special congressional election, with Democrat Mary Peltola beating out Republican candidates Nick Begich and Sarah Palin after ballot redistribution. According to data from the State of Alaska's official results, the two Republican candidates received a combined 112,783 votes compared to Peltola's 75,799. However, once the ballots for Begich—who received the least total votes in the first round—were redistributed in the second round, Peltola emerged victorious over Palin by 5,240 votes.<sup>16</sup> This, however, was only after more than

11,000 ballots for Begich were thrown out because voters did not assign rankings to Peltola or Palin. Overall, many voters in Alaska were left feeling disenfranchised; nearly 60 percent of Alaskans voted for a Republican, but the Democratic Party candidate ended up winning.

Beyond this subversion of the will of the people lies the manipulation of third-party voters into believing that RCV gives them a greater voice and fosters true multi-party competition. It does not. Rather, RCV only further entrenches the support and power of the Democratic and Republican party establishments at the expense of third parties. As

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a hypothetical example, consider a scenario wherein ranked choice voting was used in the 2020 presidential election, in which the top three candidates by total votes were Democrat Joe Biden (81,282,632 votes), Republican Donald Trump (74,223,234 votes) and Libertarian Jo Jorgensen (1,864,873 votes).<sup>17</sup> Under RCV, the ballots for Jorgensen would have either been “exhausted” or redistributed to Biden or Trump, depending on the preferences selected on each voter's ballot. As a result, the third-party voters who were disillusioned by the

Democratic and Republican candidates would have ended up voting for them anyway.

Ultimately, RCV is simply a bait-and-switch. This supposedly more “democratic” system essentially deceives third-party voters into voting for one of the mainstream candidates under the illusion of offering those voters a “choice,” which ostensibly galvanizes third-party voters to turn out in greater numbers. But that choice is an illusion; if those voters only select their preferred third-party candidate and do not rank the other candidates—which will almost always include the Democratic and Republican parties' top choices—their votes are discarded when their third-party candidate garners the least support. If third-party voters do provide ranked preferences, their

votes are automatically reallocated to those other candidates, who those voters have little interest in supporting in the first place.

In sum, ranked choice voting is rife with problems that present major threats to election integrity, fair democratic processes, and confidence in the electoral system. The American people already harbor an unprecedented degree of skepticism about secure elections, for valid reasons. A July 2024 poll conducted by The Heartland Institute and Rasmussen Reports found that 62 percent of

all voters—including a majority from every major demographic<sup>18</sup>—believe that cheating will affect the results of the 2024 election.<sup>19</sup> And, another Heartland/Rasmussen poll conducted in April 2024 found that nearly three-in-10 voters would vote illegally in the 2024 election if given the opportunity.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, there are already enough problems with our election system. Ranked choice voting does nothing to solve those problems. Instead, RCV exacerbates those problems while creating significant new ones.

## Policy Recommendations

Due to the myriad and severe problems associated with ranked choice voting, as of July 2024, 10 states have already banned RCV: Alabama, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the citizens of Alaska will be voting on a ballot measure in November 2024 that could rescind RCV, based largely on widespread feelings of disenfranchisement amongst Alaskan voters. Alaska's Supreme Court upheld the validity of that initiative in an August 2024 ruling.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this recent pushback, RCV remains on the rise. Though it is currently only used in statewide and federal elections by Alaska and Maine—with Hawaii using RCV only in special federal elections<sup>23</sup>—many states allow RCV to be used in local elections, including many major metropolitan areas.<sup>24</sup> According to a report from Fair Vote: “2023 was a big year for ranked choice voting (RCV), with seven new ballot measure wins, hundreds of thousands of voters using RCV in municipal elections, new endorsers from across the political spectrum, and increasing support from state legislatures.”<sup>25</sup>

It would behoove state legislators and policymakers to stop this proliferation by banning RCV in every jurisdiction.



# ENDNOTES

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## About the Author

Jack McPherrin is a research fellow within The Heartland Institute’s Emerging Issues Center, and also serves as Heartland’s research editor, where he manages the editorial process for all internally and externally authored Heartland publications. As a research fellow, Jack authors research papers, policy studies, legislative tip sheets, op-eds, and other policy-focused publications on a wide variety of topics. His research, writing, and advocacy focus most heavily upon emerging issues posing threats to individual rights, economic freedom, and democratic institutions, such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) systems, technocracy and digital authoritarianism, revocations of property rights, degradations of the U.S. electoral system, and the subversion of U.S. sovereignty by globalist institutions, among other important themes. Jack holds a Master of Arts in International Affairs from Loyola University-Chicago, and a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and History from Boston College.